

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA IN BESSIE HEAD'S A QUESTION OF POWER

MARY SURYA KALA¹ & SHIBILA. K²

¹Research Scholar, Prist, Deemed to be University, Vallam, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, India

²Research Supervisor, Prist, Deemed to be University, Vallam, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, India

ABSTRACT

Bessie Heads' style of writing appeals to psychological matters. In *A Question of Power*, she digs into the realm of abnormal psychology, hence fixing the work relevant to an interdisciplinary study. In the novel, the problematic situation of a child produced by the South African society in the days of apartheid is portrayed. The kid is passed up by social institutions because though her mother was White, she herself does not look White. Her mother's family disowns her. She does not really know her mother. At maturity, she receives a bizarre marriage and finally decides to migrate to Botswana. She faces discrimination, isolation and culture conflict and leads off to show abnormal behaviour. The novel, though arriving from an era of apartheid, which has been abolished, makes more or less universal and lasting statements about human societies. One sees that under traumatizing social and political situations, children and women suffer acutely and in a special way.

KEYWORDS: Bessie Head, Apartheid, Trauma, Psychosis, Psychoanalysis, Freudian, Antecedents, Traumatizing Social & Political Situations

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INTRODUCTION

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis represents a turning point in the treatment of psychosis. His technique of analysis is based along the hypothesis that: "Symptoms vanish when their unconscious antecedents have been made conscious" (Freud, 1960). This Freudian method is an empirical treatment that involves: "slow progression into the core of experience." The patient is made to systematically shed light on all areas of past life to arrive at the psychoanalytic aware of them so as to be able to decide whether or not they could have contributed to a psychotic patient's functional disorder.

Exactly as the Freudian psychoanalytic method has been in use in the area of psychology, particularly in the treatment of psychotic cases, the psychoanalytic theory has been applied to research and practice in other disciplines, especially in creative writing. Novels like James Joyce's *A portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, William Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury*, AyiKwei Armah's *The Beautiful ones are not yet Born*, *Why are we so Blest?*, owe much to Freud's psychoanalytic theory. The novel presents a story of the beginning and experience of neurotic problems in the life of the female protagonist, Elizabeth. Divided into two parts titled, Sello and Dan, the novel in the Sello section gives us the background to, and the beginning of, Elizabeth's neurosis. Like a psychoanalyst to whom the patient's history is important, the novelist gives us, in the Sello section, the aspects of Elizabeth's life history that could have caused mental tension and breakdown.

The Sello section also pictures the degeneration of Elizabeth's mental health to a very incoherent level before her recovery of sound mental health, which ends the novel. This takes in the novel a Freudian

psychoanalytical classic. The intention in this essay to use the Freudian model by discussing the story of the female protagonist and showing how the events of her life lead to psychological problems. We will also discuss her psychological problems to show how Elizabeth's story proves that: "It is possible to translate physical factors into psychic." (Jacobi, 1955).

Bessie Head presents Elizabeth's life as one fraught with troubles. These problems stem mainly from personal and social relationships. Right from childhood, Elizabeth is shown to have familial problems. She grows up with the impression that her foster parents are her real parents. Even so, she reveals in her teen years, her true relationship with her foster parents. The manner of discovery is in itself disgraceful. Elizabeth has just been sent from the place she knows to be her home to school. She has not even fallen down when the principal sends for her and tells her that: "We have a full docket on you. You must be very careful. Your mother was insane. If you're not careful you'll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up, as she was having a child by the stable boy, who was a native" (Head, 1981:16).

This is Elizabeth's introduction to her mother. Still, she maintains this information in her mind for seven years and just asks her foster mother around her actual mother when she graduates from high school. Her foster mother confirms to her that her mother is abnormal and has been insulated in an institution. On the folk stage, Elizabeth discovers that she is the daughter of a stable boy and for this her mother's family regards her more as an embarrassment than as a minor or a recounting. Elizabeth's uncle says this near the child's position:

We want to wash our hands off this business. We desire to forget it (Head, 1981:11).

If the family that can, by relationship bring her up, throws her away in this way, the society is the next to take care of her. The stepmother shows us how the society treats baby Elizabeth:

My husband worked on the child welfare committee, and your case came up again and again. First, they received you from the mental hospital and sent you to a nursing home. A day later, you were returned because you did not look white. They sent you to a Boer family. A week later you were returned. The women on the committee, said: what can we do with this child? Its mother is white.' My husband came home that night and asked me to take you. I agreed (Head, 1981:17).

This shows how Elizabeth is rejected by institutions, groups and individuals across the society until it becomes difficult to reject her any further. She learns as a teenager that the mother she thinks is hers, adopted her because nobody else would. She is told that as a child, no one, no institution accepted her as a child to be loved. If the manner of Elizabeth's adoption is important, equally seminal is the child's experiences with the woman and family she holds to be her own. In Elizabeth's foster family, the situation hardly facilitates bringing a kid up with passion and fear. The husband of Elizabeth's foster mother dies and the foster mother turns the mansion for a beer saloon. This trade leads to a worsening of the weather in the menage. The situation gets so bad in the home that it attracts this comment: "She was secretly relieved to be taken away from the beer-house and sent to a mission school, as hours and hours of her childhood had been spent sitting under a lamp-post near her house, crying because everyone was drunk and there was no food, no one to think about the children" (Head, 1981:15-16).

In the foster home, Elizabeth is made to waste away hours of her childhood attended by pangs of thirst and tears of wretchedness. These experiences form a coalition of traumatic experiences signifying a sort of childhood that knows

little love.

Elizabeth's adulthood experiences are traumatic in ways that are comparable with her childhood experiences. The novelist shows that most of her associations in adulthood put Elizabeth through relationships that fall far short of her expectations but relationships, which are by nature bizarre. There is the marriage she has. She meets an ex-convict who sounds remorseful and tame. The man suggests that he has purged himself of his criminal inclinations and has got an interest in Buddhism. Thither is a common ground here as Elizabeth too has an involvement in Buddhism and oriental religions generally. The pre-marital love affair lasts a week; they get married thereafter. After marriage, Elizabeth's husband reveals more facts about himself. He gets involved in unrestrained sexual dealings with several willing women while he abuses those who are unwilling. Elizabeth's husband becomes an embarrassment, as it seems Elizabeth cannot keep her hubby. A month after her marriage, a neighbour says to Elizabeth: "You have a strange husband. Sussie was standing outside the door and called to him. He walked straight in and they went to bed. He's been doing this nearly everyday now with Sussie. I also once greeted him and he said: 'How about a kiss?' And I said: 'Bugger off.' What made you marry that thing?" (Head, 1981:18-19).

But as there are personal experiences, which are traumatic for Elizabeth, there are also social events aimed at social groups which cause Elizabeth personal trauma. There is the social experience of Apartheid in South Africa: "She hated the country. In malice of her inability to like or understand political ideologies, she had also lived the arduous life of all black people in South Africa" (Head, 1981). Although, her mother is White, Elizabeth is discriminated against because she is not White but coloured. She is then considered and treated as a mortal who is socially and naturally inferior to Whites. Homosexuality is another societal problem that causes Elizabeth mental agony and is linked to Apartheid, which involves a defamation of a group by the simple statement of some other group. This (self) -denigration leads to conceptual barrenness, compromise of values and loss of ability to resist evil in its many varieties. Human beings see themselves as not very masculine, but are disposed to perform perverse roles that conflict with societal role expectations for them. In this sense, men play women: "They tied turbans round their heads, wore lipstick, fluttered their eyes and hands and talked in high falsetto voices. It was so widespread, so common to so many men in this town that they felt no shame at all. No one commented at these strange men dressed in women's clothes" (Head, 1981: 45).

Under Apartheid – a perversion of social relations – other social perversions and vices are bred and raised. For someone like Elizabeth, who stands by and watches social currents, she attends the outcome as the emasculation of coloured men, the men of her race; this makes her mental torment:

"The nights became torture. As she closed her eyes all these coloured men lay down on their backs, their penes in the air, and began to die slowly. Some of them who could not endure these slow deaths simply toppled over into rivers and drowned" (Head, 1981:45).

This is the depiction of the symbolic death of coloured men at the workforce of the whites. Elizabeth's psyche cannot accept the luck of the coloured men with equanimity; it replays the symbolic nature of this denigration at a time when the conscious mind should be at rest and turns Elizabeth's nights to torture periods. With the unwholesome personal and social relations in South Africa are causing Elizabeth personal trauma, she determines to accept an exit visa to Botswana.

This decision is conducted to escape the South African situation, which she regards as the suit of her outlandish experiences. She hopes that in Botswana she would exist in a society where she would be admitted along the simple term of being human. Even so, as she is to discover, cultural and cognitive differences would make her different from the average Botswana person.

The physical features of Botswana, the country that is hypothesized to facilitate Elizabeth's emancipation, are important for consideration. Elizabeth prefers to survive in a Botswana village called Motabeng. Motabeng is a village in which the nights are black. This is a contrast to what Elizabeth is used to in South Africa, where the streets are, comfortably illuminated and "at first, she found the pitch-dark darkness of the Motabeng night terrifying" (Head, 1981: 21). After more or less time, she takes up living with it.

A story of cultural difference exists between the Botswana and the South African situation. Botswana does not run an Apartheid system, so the Botswana people for this and other reasons are culturally different from South Africans. There is the conflict at the level of self-esteem and personal aspiration. It is an aberration for a non-white South African to aspire to be important. "People there had an unwritten law, they hated any black person among them who was 'important'" (Head, 1981: 26). So, when Elizabeth is asked in Botswana if she wants to be important, she gives what she considers to be a socially acceptable response by saying that she does not want to be important. Nevertheless, with the cultural conditions in Botswana, Elizabeth's response should be dissimilar.

The conflicts between the Botswana and the South African cultural situations make Elizabeth's experiences in Botswana a point of disagreement. She experiences racism in South Africa. In Botswana, she does not escape another form of favouritism. Elizabeth stands out from the local public and cannot talk about freely with them because she does not apportion the same cultural background with the Botswana people. Elizabeth's language, her way of life, and her pre-occupations on a daily basis are quite different from the average Botswana citizen's pre-occupations. She can be articulated to be experiencing racialism and alienation in Botswana: "Definitely, as far as Botswana society was touched, she was an out-and-out outsider and would never be in on their things" (Head, 1981: 26).

In her alienation and isolation, she iterates her physical, emotional, ethnic and psychological status and preference thus: "I like the general atmosphere because I don't worry whether people like me or not. I am used to isolation" (Head, 1981: 56). Elizabeth's isolation and alienation cannot be supposed to be due to cultural factors alone. She sometimes exhibits behaviour which the company considers as actions that breach the moral and social conventions of the social club. For these activities, she is dealt with by the social club as a strange kind of person who in social configurations deserves no space and few rights, an outcast.

Thither is a dialectic here, which bears pointing out. Elizabeth performs actions, which are out of tune with social rules because she is undergoing nervous tension caused by her unwholesome personal and societal experiences. Still, her actions further worsen her situation because they justify the society's treatment of her as an outcast. One incident that illustrates the above analysis is Elizabeth's verbal outburst at the radio shop, yelling at a shop attendant: "oh, you bloody bastard Botswana! Oh, you bloody bastard Botswana! And so she only opened her mouth in one long, high piercing scream" (Head, 1981: 51). With this scream, she swoons and is admitted to the infirmary.

The remote cause of this flare-up is the mental torture she has been receiving, she keeps hearing, "Dog, the nastiness, the Africans will eat you to destruction. A week of it reduced her to a wreck". (Head, 1981: 47). Her outburst is

then a desperate response to her nervous tension and the societal components that stimulate this tension. Nobody notices this; what the society determines is not Elizabeth's psychic condition; it picks up her physical responses and judge her by them, a judgment in which they feel justified not merely to isolate Elizabeth but to treat her as an outcast.

However, Elizabeth can only take very little rough treatment. After three months in Botswana, she seems to have taken in a little too much. Her South African and Botswana experiences combine to introduce strange developments in her psychic health. One of these developments is hallucination. Newman and Newman assert that: "Hallucinations are visions, sounds and feelings that are created by the people. People having hallucinations may hear voices or other sounds, feel things touching them, or see things that are not there. Hallucinations often persist over time. They are strong evidence of the failure of reality testing mechanisms" (Head, 1981: 409).

Elizabeth suddenly starts feeling that somebody gets into her hut regularly, anytime she is about to fall asleep. Her first experience goes this way: "She had just blown out the light when she had the sudden feeling that someone had entered the room... There was a swift flow of air through the room, and whatever it was moved and sat down on the chair. The chair creaked slightly. Alarmed, she swung around and lit the candle. The chair was empty" (Head, 1981: 22).

This type of event in which, Elizabeth feels someone is around her while no real person would be found, remains for many nights. She also takes in countless and extensive dreams. Lots of the fabric of the novel comes from the preconscious level. Two beings that Elizabeth encounters continuously at the preconscious level are Sello and Dan. These organisms are the managers of the bizarre enactments going on in Elizabeth's mind. The enactments they closely direct are in the two segments of the novel. Elizabeth's affairs with these men are telepathic, not physical. Sello and Dan are real and alive in Motabeng. Elizabeth does not sustain whatever relationship with the life and blood human beings; she knows very little about them. It is said of Sello that: "Very little reaches her about Sello, the living man. Right away and again, his name crops up in general conversation" (Head, 1981: 28).

The scanty information Elizabeth has on these men not with standing; she fantasizes about them in pre-consciousness. Apart from hallucinations and dreams, at that place is also phantasm in Elizabeth's private world. Phantasm is: "A subjective visual presentation of forms or absent persons, or what is taken for a disembodied spirit" (Drenver, 1976). Phantasm becomes an issue when we try to analyse the capacity of the enactments in Elizabeth's mind. In these enactments, we see a world where absent persons like Sello, Dan and Mrs. Jones is presented as being with Elizabeth in her room, sleeping on her bed and speaking with her. As well, we envision a world of disembodied spirits whom she calls names like Soul personalities, Master of Psychology and demons. In that location is also Buddha, Medusa, the Father and the Mystical Madonna. These beings are shown discussing and even making love in these enactments.

Elizabeth has a phantasmal belief that she has love relationships with Sello and Dan. Rather than prove that she has relationships with these organisms, nevertheless, the enactments that produce her conclusions point to the fact that her subconscious brain is straining under the essence of experiential factors and pain, re-enacting her past experiences as a kind of psychic malfunctioning in the present.

There is the sexual capacity of these mind dramas. In them, Sello and Dan are regarded as Elizabeth's lovers. Likewise, both beings are established to be involved in sex and homosexuality with unbridled rage. Dan has dealings with seventy-one girls and young men. The behaviour of Dan and Sello in these mind dramas replay the facts of Elizabeth's marriage. As Elizabeth's husband is reckless with sexual partners, Sello and Dan, who show up in Elizabeth's

subconscious are sexually promiscuous. Also, the display of human suffering in the parade of the poor, destitute and the oppressed appear to have its roots in Elizabeth's South African experience where she lived with poverty, deprivation and human suffering. Though this treatment of human distress and poverty has a universal note, these issues arise from Elizabeth's private life and experiences. Elizabeth says for many of the issues in the novel, her tormentors "played on her experiences in South Africa" (Head, 1981: 44). And at the top of her psychosis, she indicates that it is not only her South African experiences that are played on but also her everyday life. They "pick on people she met in daily life, always introducing a vivid, indelible fact about their sex lives, then suddenly, so out of the blue" (Head, 1981: 160).

CONCLUSIONS

A Question of Power is the story of Elizabeth's life. It is the tale of a lifetime lived in neglect, alienation, isolation and loss. It is the story of a woman that is produced by the South African Apartheid society, but is alienated and rejected by her society. The society puts her through social and personal oppression on many grounds. As a South African black, as a woman and as an idealist living in a world where ideas have no value; Elizabeth is made to suffer personally and socially. She has a nervous breakdown because of her South African experience and racism, which she sees as a Botswana emigrant. With the social forces ranged against Elizabeth, she is forced to retire into her last ground of defence, herself. Here also there is no recourse because of this, another type of horror commences. It is as if the social forces have crushed her so much that she already owns a second nature by the time she wants to rely only on herself to combat the evils of oppression, external to her. She finds that her judgment is no longer her ally, rather, her mind keeps playing back at a psychic level, the oppression and evils she has been through. It is then a situation of fighting enemies without and foes within.

Passed on the general tenor of the depiction of issues in *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth typifies the contemporary woman battling social forces, which ultimately have bizarre dimensions. She represents the contemporary woman confronting contemporary social problems and in her case, the problems of apartheid in South Africa and that of discrimination in Botswana. Her story indications the dimensions of the experiences of a typical woman under the apartheid system, which operated in South Africa. While apartheid may have been abolished, her experiences in Botswana show that even among the Africans there is a demand for greater adjustment and agreement at a virtual degree.

Elizabeth's predicament equally iterates the fact that where social rights are denied, women and children ultimately feel the arrest in an acute manner. It demonstrates the vulnerability of women who, along with general social suffering, suffer through unhappy and unstable marriages, social branding and even the agony of kids who raise up under unstable and loveless home environment. Proving that in situations of social oppression, the family usually goes into a crisis and where the family suffers, children and women sustain a big proportion of the effects of such social disjunctions and malaise.

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